

Disconcerted Parent-Kin Relationships: A Literary Analysis of *Interpreter of Maladies*

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Abstract

Interpreter of Maladies is a collection of short stories comprised of characters of Indian descent living in the United States, particularly New England. There is a variety of plots within the collection that depicts a diverse society of immigrants. The characters ranging from children who try to make a sense of their home lives versus their school lives, to young adults unsure of being American and their connection to their heritage, and finally older adults who continually struggle to accept their new lives and forget their old. Children are crucial to the action of a number of Lahiri's stories. They serve to illuminate adult characters while, at the same time, they have a definitive role as individuals. These characters react quite differently to their family, friends, and enemies, comprising an unbiased illustration of how varied Indian immigrants' personalities are despite their common ethnic background.

Keywords: Immigrant, Heritage, Struggle, Ethnic

INTRODUCTION

Lahiri's Indian heritage forms the basis for her short stories; stories in which she deals with questions of identity, alienation and the plight of those who are culturally displaced. She vividly shows the estrangement and isolation that often afflict first and even second generation immigrants. Jhumpa Lahiri's characters tend to be immigrants from India, and their American reared children, exiles who straddle two countries, two cultures, not belonging to either; they are too used to freedom to accept the rituals and conventions of home, and yet too steeped in tradition to embrace American mores fully. Lahiri delves into the souls of these indelible characters struggling with displacement, guilt, and fear as they try to find a balance between the solace and suffocation of tradition, and the terror and excitement of the future into which they are being thrust. This collection is about Indians settled abroad, and Lahiri addresses their struggles with multicultural upbringing and environment.

Jhumpa Lahiri is of Indian descent; both her parents were born in India. She was born in London, but grew up in Rhode Island, a state on the east coast of the United States. From childhood, she often accompanied her parents back to India – particularly in Calcutta, the third-largest city in India, located in the state of West Bengal, close to India's eastern border with Bangladesh. After being published in prestigious magazines such as *The New Yorker*, Lahiri was

awarded the highest literary honour in the United States, the Pulitzer Prize for Literature, in 2000. Since then, she has been awarded many other prizes, including the O. Henry Award for short stories. In 2003, she wrote the novel *The Namesake*, which was made into a movie in 2006. In 2008, a second collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, was published. Lahiri lives in New York City with her husband and two children.

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Children are crucial to the action of a number of Lahiri's stories. They serve to illuminate adult characters while, at the same time, they have a definitive role as individuals. In "Mrs Sen's" story the boy, Eliot, functions as a foil to demonstrate Mrs Sen's inability to assimilate into American culture. Although Mrs Sen dominates the story, Eliot becomes a figure who not only illustrates the balance between the cultures, but also develops as a character who grows through experiencing other customs. Eliot is an eleven-year-old white American boy; while Mrs. Sen, the next in a line of Eliot's after school a "babysitter", is hired because she is a "Professor's wife, responsible and kind" (Lahiri, IOM 111). She is, of course, much more than this – as Eliot is soon to find out. She is a traditional Indian wife who feels isolated and lost in the foreignness of American culture. It is perceived that Mrs Sen through the eyes of Eliot, who notices the striking differences between the domestic life of these Indian immigrants and his own. Through his thoughts, a detailed description is given of the Sens' apartment, suggesting that he perceives the family as strange. Indeed, his ability to absorb and enjoy this alternative way of life becomes a rich learning experience for him.

Eliot, in fact, compares the lushness of Mrs Sen and her beautiful attire – "she wore a shimmering white sari patterned with orange paisleys" – favourably against his mother's "cropped hair ... her shaved knees and thighs too exposed" (Lahiri, IOM 112–13). Unlike Eliot's own home, Mrs Sen's is welcoming and her apartment is warm. He soon comes to look forward to watching her "as she chopped things, seated on newspapers on the living room floor" (Lahiri, IOM 114). He is fascinated with the knife she uses, "curved like the prow of a Viking ship" (114). But Mrs Sen is so alienated from her new life, and so starved for company, that she allows Eliot to become her confidante. During this process, he learns not only to accept another person's culture, but also to shield Mrs Sen from her fear of living in a world that is alien to her. Through her, Eliot comes to understand the anxiety that ensues from being cut off from one's family and

friends, and the frustrations of being unable to prepare the food that ties one to a particular culture.

After Mrs Sen's car accident, Eliot is left at home as a 'latch-key' child and feels, for the first time, the sterility of his own culture in contrast with the richness of Mrs Sen's. Both have benefited from their mutual association. In contrast, the seven-year-old boy in "Sexy" acts as a catalyst for Miranda to realise that her relationship with the married Dev is neither appropriate nor beneficial to her. She is swept into her liaison with Dev, attracted by his difference and lured by his Indian heritage. Their story runs parallel with that of Laxmi's cousin, whose husband has absconded with another woman whom "he sat next to... on a flight from Delhi to Montreal" (Lahiri, IOM 83). His son, we learn from Miranda's friend Laxmi, is very bright, but badly affected by his father's dereliction of his family. When Miranda's friend asks her to look after him, she is startled by his perceptions. When the boy asks Miranda to wear the special dress she has bought to wear with Dev, he unexpectedly describes her as 'sexy'. The depth of his pain is discovered when he explains that being sexy "means loving someone you don't know" (Lahiri, IOM 107). With this remark, he reveals how badly affected he has been by his mother's constant emotional outbursts and his father's abandonment. After thinking about the boy's words, Miranda understands the significance of the betrayal represented by her affair with Dev. The boy's pain has made her realise that "it wasn't fair to her, or to his wife, that they both deserved better" (Lahiri, IOM 110). The child's experiences have pointed her towards the reality of the emotional suffering inevitably involved in such a deceitful relationship.

The first-person speaker of "When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine" is a ten-year-old girl, Lilia, who finally comes to understand the pain caused by separation from one's family. Mr Pirzada is a Moslem Bangladeshi who is trapped in America when the war of separation breaks out in western India. Each evening he is asked to dine with Lilia's family, who are Indian immigrants. Lilia is caught between the traditions of her parents and American Insight culture. She does not understand her parents' complaints about the unavailability of ingredients for Indian food, or their lament that neighbours "never dropped by without an invitation" (Lahiri, IOM 24). Mr Pirzada is invited to their house simply because he is Indian; or, as her father explains, "Mr Pirzada is no longer considered Indian" (Lahiri, IOM 25), something that made no sense to Lilia. Her mother understands that Lilia is American – "we live here now, she was born here" (Lahiri, IOM 26) – and has little understanding of the politics of India and Pakistan. Yet, something still fascinates Lilia about her parents' homeland. Lilia perceives Mr Pirzada as somewhat exotic in his "ensembles of plums, olives, and chocolate browns" (Lahiri, IOM 27). His presence even makes her feel rather "like a stranger in [her] own home" (Lahiri, IOM 29). Every evening he brings her sweets, which she feels are "inappropriate... to consume" (29), placing them in a sandalwood box she inherited from a grandmother, she had never known; an indication of the empty space in her life created by her lack of familial connections. It is through Mr Pirzada's

watch set to the local time in Dacca that Lilia comes to realise that, while Mr Pirzada is physically present in America, his experiences there are no more than “a lagging ghost of where [he] really belonged” (Lahiri, IOM 31) – with his family in Dacca. Gradually Lilia, through her contact with Mr Pirzada, is brought to understand the significance of other cultures and other people’s fight for independence.

Her colourless American history lessons seem unremarkable when set against the history being created in the here and now, and the anticipation of the “birth of a nation on the other side of the world” (Lahiri, IOM 34). Lahiri subtly uses the persona of Lilia to filter the cultural differences between India/Pakistan and the reality of the American culture that Lilia is born into. She dutifully learns the history of her birth country but is drawn inexorably towards that of her parents. For Lilia, as war looms in East Pakistan, the details remain “a remote mystery with haphazard clues” (Lahiri, IOM 40) that she is somehow excluded from; she knows only that Mr Pirzada and her parents operated as “a single body” with “a single fear” (Lahiri, IOM 41). After the war, Mr Pirzada returns home to his family, which has survived. He will never revisit America, but Lilia has learned through this stranger what it means “to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away” (Lahiri, IOM 42).

In “A Temporary Matter” a young couple Shoba and Shukumar exchange confessions after a long silence to cope with the failure in their marriage. They become exiles, not of countries and culture, but of their still-born dreams. Shoba is not able to forget the absence of her husband at the time of her still-born child. The sorrow of the lost child causes a communication breakdown in the relationship of Shukumar and Shoba. They avoid each other and their friends, Shoba fills her time with work and Shukumar procrastinating over finishing his dissertation. The lack of communication compounded by the loss of identity one feels in an alien culture, makes the couple avoid each other and find refuge in a place where the other does not frequent. Shukumar, unable to bear the pangs of being alienated reveals on his part the mystery concerned with the features of their still-born baby. Somehow their mutual confession brings them together in a flood of tears underlining the fact that cultural roots cannot be severed so easily. It is true as A. K. Mukherjee comments, “The marriage bond, which is still considered sacrosanct in India, is gradually slithering down under the pressure of new needs under a different background” (280-81).

Jhumpa’s other story “Sexy” revolves around a lady named Miranda who gets entangled in an affair with an Indian only to realize the worthlessness of a relation that is not socially approved and accepted. The concept of love is purely physical for her; that’s why she does not hesitate to glide into a relationship that has no future. Physical satisfaction starts giving way to the realization that acceptance of the body is altogether different from the acceptance of relationship. Initially she feels elated when her paramour Dev calls her sexy, “It was the first time a man had called her sexy, and when she closed her eyes, she could still feel his whisper drifting through her body, under her skin” (Lahiri, IOM 93). Her mirage gets blurred when she has to look after the child of her roommate’s cousin. The child becomes the vehicle that makes

her realize the hollowness of her affair that would eventually result in nothing but pain and isolation. The child, like her lover, calls her sexy after forcing her to put on a glamorous silver cocktail dress. Her confusion requires an explanation and the explanation shatters her flimsy cobweb of illusions. The boy tells her that to him sexy “means loving someone you don’t know” (Lahiri, IOM 107). The dawn of realization makes her decide the course of her drifted life and she preferred to opt out of an already dead relationship.

Works Cited

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